
Christ and Nothing

David B. Hart

As modern men and women—to the degree that we are modern—we believe in nothing. This is not to say, I hasten to add, that we do not believe in anything; I mean, rather, that we hold an unshakable, if often unconscious, faith in *the* nothing, or in nothingness as such. It is this in which we place our trust, upon which we venture our souls, and onto which we project the values by which we measure the meaningfulness of our lives. Or, to phrase the matter more simply and starkly, our religion is one of very comfortable nihilism.

This may seem a somewhat apocalyptic note to sound, at least without any warning or emollient prelude, but I believe I am saying nothing not almost tediously obvious. We live in an age whose chief moral value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the absolute liberty of personal volition, the power of each of us to choose what he or she believes, wants, needs, or must possess; our culturally most persuasive models of human freedom are unambiguously voluntarist and, in a rather debased and degraded way, Promethean; the will, we believe, is sovereign because unpremiered, free because spontaneous, and this is the highest good. And a society that believes this must, at least implicitly, embrace and subtly advocate a very particular moral metaphysics: the unreality of any “value” higher than choice, or of any transcendent Good ordering desire towards a higher end. Desire is

free to propose, seize, accept or reject, want or not want—but not to obey. Society must thus be secured against the intrusions of the Good, or of God, so that its citizens may determine their own lives by the choices they make from a universe of morally indifferent but variably desirable ends, unencumbered by any prior grammar of obligation or value (in America, we call this the “wall of separation”). Hence the liberties that permit one to purchase lavender bed clothes, to gaze fervently at pornography, to become a Unitarian, to market popular celebrations of brutal violence, or to destroy one’s unborn child are all equally intrinsically “good” because all are expressions of an inalienable freedom of choice. But, of course, if the will determines itself only in and through such choices, free from any prevenient natural order, then it too is in itself nothing. And so, at the end of modernity, each of us who is true to the times stands facing not God, or the gods, or the Good beyond beings, but an abyss, over which presides the empty, inviolable authority of the individual will, whose impulses and decisions are their own moral index.

This is not to say that—sentimental barbarians that we are—we do not still invite moral and religious constraints upon our actions; none but the most demonic, demented, or adolescent among us genuinely desires to live in a world purged of visible boundaries and hospitable shelters. Thus this man may elect not to buy a particular vehicle because he considers himself an environmentalist; or this woman may choose not to have an abortion midway through her second trimester, because the fetus, at that point in its gestation, seems to her too fully formed, and she—personally—would feel wrong about terminating “it.” But this merely illustrates my point: we take as given the individual’s right not merely to obey or defy the moral law, but to

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choose which moral standards to adopt, which values to uphold, which fashion of piety to wear and with what accessories.

Even our ethics are achievements of will. And the same is true of those custom-fitted spiritualities—"New Age," occult, pantheist, "Wiccan," or what have you—by which many of us now divert ourselves from the quotidian dreariness of our lives. These gods of the boutique can come from anywhere—native North American religion, the Indian subcontinent, some Pre-Raphaelite grove shrouded in Celtic twilight, cunning purveyors of otherwise worthless quartz, pages drawn at random from Robert Graves, Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, or that redoubtable old Aryan, Joseph Campbell—but where such gods inevitably come to rest are not so much divine hierarchies as ornamental *étagères*, where their principal office is to provide symbolic representations of the dreamier sides of their votaries' personalities. The triviality of this sort of devotion, its want of dogma or discipline, its tendency to find its divinities not in glades and grottoes but in gift shops make it obvious that this is no reversion to pre-Christian polytheism. It is, rather, a thoroughly modern religion, whose burlesque gods command neither reverence, nor dread, nor love, nor belief; they are no more than the masks worn by that same spontaneity of will that is the one unrivalled demiurge who rules this age and alone bids its spirits come and go.

Which brings me at last to my topic. "I am the Lord thy God," says the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." For Israel this was first and foremost a demand of fidelity, by which God bound His people to Himself, even if in later years it became also a proclamation to the nations. To Christians, however, the commandment came through—and so was indissolubly bound to—Christ. As such, it was not simply a prohibition of foreign cults, but a call to arms, an assault upon the antique order of the heavens—a declaration of war upon the gods. All the world was to be evangelized and baptized, all idols torn down, all worship given over to the one God who, in these latter days, had sent His Son into the world for our salvation. It was a long and sometimes terrible conflict, occasionally exacting a fearful price in martyrs' blood, but it was, by any just estimate, a victory: the temples of Zeus and Isis alike were finally deserted, both the paean and the dithyramb ceased to be sung, altars were bereft of their sacrifices, the sibyls fell silent, and ultimately all the glory, nobility, and cruelty of the ancient world lay supine at the feet of Christ the conqueror.

Nor, for early Christians, was this mere metaphor. When a gentile convert stood in the baptistery on Easter's eve and, before descending naked into the waters,

turned to the West to renounce the devil and the devil's ministers, he was rejecting, and in fact reviling, the gods in bondage to whom he had languished all his life; and when he turned to the East to confess Christ, he was entrusting himself to the invincible hero who had plundered hell of its captives, overthrown death, subdued the powers of the air, and been raised the Lord of history. Life, for the early Church, was spiritual warfare; and no baptized Christian could doubt how great a transformation—of the self and the world—it was to consent to serve no other god than Him whom Christ revealed.

We are still at war, of course, but the situation of the Church has materially altered, and I suspect that, by comparison to the burden the First Commandment lays upon us today, the defeat of the ancient pantheon, and the elemental spirits, and the demons lurking behind them will prove to have been sublimely easy. For, as I say, we moderns believe in nothing: the nothingness of the will miraculously giving itself form by mastering the nothingness of the world. The gods, at least, were real, if distorted, intimations of the *mysterium tremendum*, and so could inspire something like holy dread or, occasionally, holy love. They were brutes, obviously, but often also benign despots, and all of us I think, in those secret corners of our souls where we are all monarchists, can appreciate a good despot, if he is sufficiently dashing and mysterious, and able to strike an attractive balance between capricious wrath and serene benevolence. Certainly the Olympians had panache, and a terrible beauty whose disappearance from the world was a bereavement to obdurately devout pagans. Moreover, in their very objectivity and supremacy over their worshipers, the gods gave the Church enemies with whom it could come to grips. Perhaps they were just so many gaudy veils and ornate brocades drawn across the abyss of night, death, and nature, but they had distinct shapes and established cults, and when their mysteries were abandoned, so were they.

How, though, to make war on nothingness, on the abyss itself, denuded of its mythic allure? It seems to me much easier to convince a man that he is in thrall to demons and offer him manumission than to convince him that he is a slave to himself and prisoner to his own will. Here is a god more elusive, protean, and indomitable than either Apollo or Dionysus; and whether he manifests himself in some demonic titanism of the will, like the mass delirium of the Third Reich, or simply in the mesmeric banality of consumer culture, his throne has been set in the very hearts of those he enslaves. And it is this god, I think, against whom the First Commandment calls us now to struggle.

There is, however, a complication even to this. As Christians, we are glad to assert that the commandment to have no other god, when allied to the gospel, liberated us from the divine *ancien régime*; or that this same commandment must be proclaimed again if modern persons are to be rescued from the superstitions of our age. But there is another, more uncomfortable assertion we should also be willing to make: that humanity could not have passed from the devotions of antiquity to those of modernity but for the force of Christianity in history, and so—as a matter of historical fact—Christianity, with its cry of “no other god,” is in part responsible for the nihilism of our culture. The gospel shook the ancient world to its foundations, indeed tore down the heavens, and so helped to bring us to the ruin of the present moment.

The word “nihilism” has a complex history in modern philosophy, but I use it in a sense largely determined by Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom not only diagnosed modernity as nihilism, but saw Christianity as complicit in its genesis; both it seems to me were penetratingly correct in some respects, if disastrously wrong in most, and both raised questions that we Christians ignore at our peril. Nietzsche’s case is the cruder of the two, if in some ways the more perspicacious; for him, modernity is simply the final phase of the disease called Christianity. Whereas the genius of the Greeks—so his story goes—was to gaze without illusion into the chaos and terror of the world, and respond not with fear or resignation but with affirmation and supreme artistry, they were able to do this only on account of their nobility, which means their ruthless willingness to discriminate between the “good”—that is, the strength, exuberance, bravery, generosity, and harshness of the aristocratic spirit—and the “bad”—the weakness, debility, timorousness, and vindictive resentfulness of the slavish mind. And this same standard—“noble wisdom,” for want of a better term—was the foundation and mortar of Roman civilization.

Christianity, however, was a slave revolt in morality: the cunning of the weak triumphed over the nobility of the strong, the resentment of the many converted the pride of the few into self-torturing guilt, the higher man’s distinction between the good and the bad was replaced by the lesser man’s spiteful distinction between good and “evil,” and the tragic wisdom of the Greeks sank beneath the flood of Christianity’s pity and pusillanimity. This revolt, joined to an ascetic and sterile devotion to positive fact, would ultimately slay even God. And, as a result, we have now entered the age of the Last Men, whom Nietzsche depicts in terms too close for comfort to the banality, conformity, and self-indulgence of modern mass culture.

Heidegger’s tale is not as catastrophist, and so emphasizes less Christianity’s novelty than its continuity with a nihilism implicit in all Western thought, from at least the time of Plato (which Nietzsche, in his way, also acknowledged). Nihilism, says Heidegger, is born in a forgetfulness of the mystery of being, and in the attempt to capture and master being in artifacts of reason (the chief example—and indeed the prototype of every subsequent apostasy from true “ontology”—being Plato’s ideas). Scandalously to oversimplify his argument, it is, says Heidegger, the history of this nihilistic impulse to reduce being to an object of the intellect, subject to the will, that has brought us at last to the age of technology, for which reality is just so many quanta of power, the world a representation of consciousness, and the earth a mere reserve awaiting exploitation; technological mastery has become our highest ideal, and our only real model of truth. Christianity, for its part, is not so much a new thing as a prolonged episode within the greater history of nihilism, notable chiefly for having brought part of this history’s logic to its consummation by having invented the metaphysical God, the form of all forms, who grounds all of being in himself as absolute efficient cause, and who personifies that cause as total power and will. From this God, in the fullness of time, would be born the modern subject who has usurped God’s place.

I hope I will be excused both for so cursory a précis and for the mild perversity that causes me to see some merit in both of these stories. Heidegger seems to me obviously correct in regarding modernity’s nihilism as the fruition of seeds sown in pagan soil; and Nietzsche also correct to call attention to Christianity’s shocking—and, for the antique order of noble values, irreparably catastrophic—novelty; but neither grasped why he was correct. For indeed Christianity was complicit in the death of antiquity and in the birth of modernity, not because it was an accomplice of the latter, but because it alone, in the history of the West, was a rejection of and alternative to nihilism’s despair, violence, and idolatry of power; as such, Christianity shattered the imposing and enchanting façade behind which nihilism once hid, and thereby, inadvertently, called it forth into the open.

I am speaking (impressionistically, I grant) of something pervasive in the ethos of European antiquity, which I would call a kind of glorious sadness. The great Indo-European mythos, from which Western culture sprang, was chiefly one of sacrifice: it understood the cosmos as a closed system, a finite totality, within which gods and mortals alike occupied places determined by fate. And this totality was, of necessity, an economy, a cycle of creation and destruction, oscillating between order and chaos, form and indeterminacy:

a great circle of feeding, preserving life through a system of transactions with death. This is the myth of "cosmos"—of the universe as a precarious equilibrium of contrary forces—which undergirded a sacrificial practice whose aim was to contain nature's promiscuous violence within religion's orderly violence. The terrible dynamism of nature had to be both resisted and controlled by rites at once apotropaic—appeasing chaos and rationalizing it within the stability of cult—and economic—recuperating its sacrificial expenditures in the form of divine favor, a numinous power reinforcing the regime that sacrifice served. And this regime was, naturally, a fixed hierarchy of social power, atop which stood the gods, a little lower kings and nobles, and at the bottom slaves; the order of society, both divine and natural in provenance, was a fixed and yet somehow fragile "hierarchy within totality" that had to be preserved against the forces that surrounded it, while yet drawing on those forces for its spiritual sustenance. Gods and mortals were bound together by necessity; we fed the gods, who required our sacrifices, and they preserved us from the forces they personified and granted us some measure of their power. There was, surely, an ineradicable nihilism in such an economy: a tragic resignation before fate, followed by a prudential act of cultic salvage, for the sake of social and cosmic stability.

As it happens, the word "tragic" is especially apt here. A sacrificial mythos need not always express itself in slaughter, after all. Attic tragedy, for instance, began as a sacrificial rite. It was performed during the festival of Dionysus, which was a fertility festival, of course, but only because it was also an apotropaic celebration of delirium and death: the Dionysia was a sacred negotiation with the wild, antinomian cruelty of the god whose violent orgiastic cult had once, so it was believed, gravely imperiled the city; and the hope that prompted the feast was that, if this devastating force could be contained within bright Apollonian forms and propitiated through a ritual carnival of controlled disorder, the polis could survive for another year, its precarious peace intact.

The religious vision from which Attic tragedy emerged was one of the human community as a kind of besieged citadel preserving itself through the tribute it paid to the powers that both threatened and enlivened it. I can think of no better example of this than that of *Antigone*, in which the tragic crisis is the result of an insoluble moral conflict between familial piety (a sacred obligation) and the civil duties of kingship (a holy office): Antigone, as a woman, is bound to the chthonian gods (gods of the dead, so of family and household), and Creon, as king, is bound to Apollo (god of the city), and so both are adhering to sacred

obligations. The conflict between them, then, far from involving a tension between the profane and the holy, is a conflict within the divine itself, whose only possible resolution is the death—the sacrifice—of the protagonist. Other examples, however, are legion. Necessity's cruel intransigence rules the gods no less than us; tragedy's great power is simply to reconcile us to this truth, to what must be, and to the violences of the city that keep at bay the greater violence of cosmic or social disorder.

Nor does one require extraordinarily penetrating insight to see how the shadow of this mythos falls across the philosophical schools of antiquity. To risk a generalization even more reckless than those I have already made: from the time of the pre-Socratics, all the great speculative and moral systems of the pagan world were, in varying degrees, confined to this totality, to either its innermost mechanisms or outermost boundaries; rarely did any of them catch even a glimpse of what might lie beyond such a world; and none could conceive of reality except as a kind of strife between order and disorder, within which a sacrificial economy held all forces in tension. This is true even of Platonism, with its inextirpable dualism, its dialectic of change and the changeless (or of limit and the infinite), and its equation of truth with eidetic abstraction; the world, for all its beauty, is the realm of fallen vision, separated by a great *chorismos* from the realm of immutable reality.

It is true of Aristotle too: the dialectic of act and potency that, for sublunary beings, is inseparable from decay and death, or the scale of essences by which all things—especially various classes of persons—are assigned their places in the natural and social order. Stoicism offers an obvious example: a vision of the universe as a fated, eternally repeated divine and cosmic history, a world in which finite forms must constantly perish simply in order to make room for others, and which in its entirety is always consumed in a final *ecpyrosis* (which makes a sacrificial pyre, so to speak, of the whole universe). And Neoplatonism furnishes the most poignant example, inasmuch as its monism merely inverts earlier Platonism's dualism and only magnifies the melancholy. Not only is the mutable world separated from its divine principle—the One—by intervals of emanation that descend in ever greater alienation from their source, but because the highest truth is the secret identity between the human mind and the One, the labor of philosophy is one of escape: all multiplicity, change, particularity, every feature of the living world, is not only accidental to this formless identity, but a kind of falsehood, and to recover

the truth that dwells within, one must detach oneself from what lies without, including the sundry incidents of one's individual existence; truth is oblivion of the flesh, a pure nothingness, to attain which one must sacrifice the world.

In any event, the purpose behind these indefensibly broad pronouncements—however elliptically pursued—is to aid in recalling how shatteringly subversive Christianity was of so many of the certitudes of the world it entered, and how profoundly its exclusive fidelity to the God of Christ transformed that world. This is, of course, no more than we should expect, if we take the New Testament's Paschal triumphalism to heart: "Now is the judgment of this world, now will the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31); "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33); he is "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion" and all things are put "under his feet" (Ephesians 1:21-2); "having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:15); "he led captivity captive" (Ephesians 4:8); and so on. Still, we can largely absorb Scripture's talk of the defeat of the devil, the angels of the nations, and the powers of the air, and yet fail to recognize how radically the Gospels reinterpreted (or, as Nietzsche would say, "transvalued") everything in the light of Easter.

The example of this I find most striking is the account John's Gospel gives of the dialogue between Christ and Pilate (John 18:28-19:12). Nietzsche, the quixotic champion of the old standards, thought jesting Pilate's "What is truth?" to be the only moment of actual nobility in the New Testament, the wry taunt of an acerbic ironist unimpressed by the pathetic fantasies of a deranged peasant. But one need not share Nietzsche's sympathies to take his point; one can certainly see what is at stake when Christ, scourged and mocked, is brought before Pilate a second time: the latter's "Whence art thou?" has about it something of a demand for a pedigree, which might at least lend some credibility to the claims Christ makes for himself; for want of which, Pilate can do little other than pronounce his truth: "I have power to crucify thee" (which, to be fair, would under most circumstances be an incontrovertible argument).

It is worth asking ourselves what this tableau, viewed from the vantage of pagan antiquity, would have meant. A man of noble birth, representing the power of Rome, endowed with authority over life and death, confronted by a barbarous colonial of no name or estate, a slave of the empire, beaten, robed in purple, crowned with thorns, insanely invoking an other-worldly kingdom and some esoteric truth, unaware of

either his absurdity or his judge's eminence. Who could have doubted where, between these two, the truth of things was to be found? But the Gospel is written in the light of the resurrection, which reverses the meaning of this scene entirely. If God's truth is in fact to be found where Christ stands, the mockery visited on him redounds instead upon the emperor, all of whose regal finery, when set beside the majesty of the servile shape in which God reveals Himself, shows itself to be just so many rags and briars.

This slave is the Father's eternal Word, whom God has vindicated, and so ten thousand immemorial certainties are unveiled as lies: the first become last, the mighty are put down from their seats and the lowly exalted, the hungry are filled with good things while the rich are sent empty away. Nietzsche was quite right to be appalled. Almost as striking, for me, is the tale of Peter, at the cock's crow, going apart to weep. Nowhere in the literature of pagan antiquity, I assure you, had the tears of a rustic been regarded as worthy of anything but ridicule; to treat them with reverence, as meaningful expressions of real human sorrow, would have seemed grotesque from the perspective of all the classical canons of good taste. Those wretchedly subversive tears, and the dangerous philistinism of a narrator so incorrigibly vulgar as to treat them with anything but contempt, were most definitely signs of a slave revolt in morality, if not quite the one against which Nietzsche inveighed—a revolt, moreover, that all the ancient powers proved impotent to resist.

In a narrow sense, then, one might say that the chief offense of the Gospels is their defiance of the insights of tragedy—and not only because Christ does not fit the model of the well-born tragic hero. More important is the incontestable truth that, in the Gospels, the destruction of the protagonist emphatically does not restore or affirm the order of city or cosmos. Were the Gospels to end with Christ's sepulture, in good tragic style, it would exculpate all parties, including Pilate and the Sanhedrin, whose judgments would be shown to have been fated by the exigencies of the crisis and the burdens of their offices; the story would then reconcile us to the tragic necessity of all such judgments. But instead comes Easter, which rudely interrupts all the minatory and sententious moralisms of the tragic chorus, just as they are about to be uttered to full effect, and which cavalierly violates the central tenet of sound economics: rather than trading the sacrificial victim for some supernatural benefit, and so the particular for the universal, Easter restores the slain hero in his particularity again, as the only truth the Gospels have to offer. This is more than a dramatic peripety. The empty tomb overturns all the "responsible" and

“necessary” verdicts of Christ’s judges, and so grants them neither legitimacy nor pardon.

In a larger sense, then, the entire sacrificial logic of a culture was subverted in the Gospels. I cannot attempt here a treatment of the biblical language of sacrifice, but I think I can safely assert that Christ’s death does not, in the logic of the New Testament sources, fit the pattern of sacrifice I have just described. The word “sacrifice” is almost inexhaustible in its polysemy, particularly in the Old Testament, but the only sacrificial model explicitly invoked in the New Testament is that of the Atonement offering of Israel, which certainly belongs to no cosmic cycle of prudent expenditure and indemnity. It is, rather, a *qurban*, literally a “drawing nigh” into the life-giving presence of God’s glory. Israel’s God requires nothing; He creates, elects, and sanctifies without need—and so the Atonement offering can in no way contribute to any sort of economy. It is instead a penitent approach to a God who gives life freely, and who not only does not profit from the holocaust of the particular, but who in fact fulfils the “sacrifice” simply by giving his gift again. This giving again is itself, in fact, a kind of “sacrificial” motif in Hebrew Scripture, achieving its most powerful early expression in the story of Isaac’s *aqedah*, and arriving at its consummation, perhaps, in Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of dry bones. After all, a people overly burdened by the dolorous superstitions of tragic wisdom could never have come to embrace the doctrine of resurrection.

I am tempted to say, then, that the cross of Christ is not simply a sacrifice, but the place where two opposed understandings of sacrifice clashed. Christ’s whole life was a reconciling *qurban*: an approach to the Father, a real indwelling of God’s glory in the temple of Christ’s body, and an atonement made for a people enslaved to death. In pouring himself out in the form of a servant, and in living his humanity as an offering up of everything to God in love, the shape of the eternal Son’s life was already sacrificial in this special sense; and it was this absolute giving, as God and man, that was made complete on Golgotha. While, from a pagan perspective, the crucifixion itself could be viewed as a sacrifice in the most proper sense—destruction of the agent of social instability for the sake of peace, which is always a profitable exchange—Christ’s life of charity, service, forgiveness, and righteous judgment could not; indeed, it would have to seem the very opposite of sacrifice, an aneconomic and indiscriminate inversion of rank and order. Yet, at Easter, it is the latter that God accepts and the former He rejects; what, then, of all the hard-won tragic wisdom of the ages?

Naturally, also, with the death of the old mythos, metaphysics too was transformed. For one thing, while every ancient system of philosophy had to presume an

economy of necessity binding the world of becoming to its inmost or highest principles, Christian theology taught from the first that the world was God’s creature in the most radically ontological sense: that it is called from nothingness, not out of any need on God’s part, but by grace. The world adds nothing to the being of God, and so nothing need be sacrificed for His glory or sustenance. In a sense, God and world alike were liberated from the fetters of necessity; God could be accorded His true transcendence and the world its true character as divine gift. The full implications of this probably became visible to Christian philosophers only with the resolution of the fourth-century trinitarian controversies, when the subordinationist schemes of Alexandrian trinitarianism were abandoned, and with them the last residue within theology of late Platonism’s vision of a descending scale of divinity mediating between God and world—the both of them comprised in a single totality.

In any event, developed Christian theology rejected nothing good in the metaphysics, ethics, or method of ancient philosophy, but—with a kind of omnivorous glee—assimilated such elements as served its ends, and always improved them in the process. Stoic morality, Plato’s language of the Good, Aristotle’s metaphysics of act and potency—all became richer and more coherent when emancipated from the morbid myths of sacrificial economy and tragic necessity. In truth, Christian theology nowhere more wantonly celebrated its triumph over the old gods than in the use it made of the so-called *spolia Aegyptiorum*; and, by despoiling pagan philosophy of its most splendid achievements and integrating them into a vision of reality more complete than philosophy could attain on its own, theology took to itself irrevocably all the intellectual glories of antiquity. The temples were stripped of their gold and precious ornaments, the sacred vessels were carried away into the precincts of the Church and turned to better uses, and nothing was left behind but a few grim, gaunt ruins to lure back the occasional disenchanted Christian and shelter a few atavistic ghosts.

This last observation returns me at last to my earlier contention: that Christianity assisted in bringing the nihilism of modernity to pass. The command to have no other god but Him whom Christ revealed was never for Christians simply an invitation to forsake an old cult for a new, but was an announcement that the shape of the world had changed, from the depths of hell to the heaven of heavens, and all nations were called to submit to Jesus as Lord. In the great “transvaluation” that followed, there was no sphere of social, religious, or intellectual life that the Church did not claim for itself; much was abolished, and much of

the grandeur and beauty of antiquity was preserved in a radically altered form, and Christian civilization—with its new synthesis and new creativity—was born.

But what is the consequence, then, when Christianity, as a living historical force, recedes? We have no need to speculate, as it happens; modernity speaks for itself: with the withdrawal of Christian culture, all the glories of the ancient world that it baptized and redeemed have perished with it in the general cataclysm. Christianity is the midwife of nihilism, not because it is itself nihilistic, but because it is too powerful in its embrace of the world and all of the world's mystery and beauty; and so to reject Christianity now is, of necessity, to reject everything except the barren anonymity of spontaneous subjectivity. As Ivan Karamazov's Grand Inquisitor tells Christ, the freedom that the gospel brings is too terrible to be borne indefinitely. Our sin makes us feeble and craven, and we long to flee from the liberty of the sons of God; but where now can we go? Everything is Christ's.

This is illustrated with striking clarity by the history of modern philosophy, at least in its continental (and, so to speak, proper) form. It is fashionable at present, among some theologians, to attempt precise genealogies of modernity, which in general I would rather avoid doing; but it does seem clear to me that the special preoccupations and perversities of modern philosophy were incubated in the age of late Scholasticism, with the rise of nominalism and voluntarism. Whereas earlier theology spoke of God as Goodness as such, whose every act (by virtue of divine simplicity) expresses His nature, the spectre that haunts late Scholastic thought is a God whose will precedes His nature, and whose acts then are feats of pure spontaneity. It is a logically incoherent way of conceiving of God, as it happens (though I cannot argue that here), but it is a powerful idea, elevating as it does will over all else and redefining freedom—for God and, by extension, for us—not as the unhindered realization of a nature (the liberty to "become what you are"), but as the absolute liberty of the will in determining even what its nature is.

Thus when modern philosophy established itself anew as a discipline autonomous from theology, it did so naturally by falling back upon an ever more abyssal subjectivity. Real autonomy could not be gained by turning back to the wonder of being or to the transcendental perfections of the world, for to do so would be to slip again into a sphere long colonized by theology. And so the new point of departure for reason had to be the perceiving subject rather than the world perceived. Descartes, for instance, explicitly forbade himself any recourse to the world's testimony of itself; in his third Meditation, he seals all his senses against nature, so that he can undertake his rational reconstruction of reality

from a position pure of any certitude save that of the ego's own existence. The world is recovered thereafter only insofar as it is "posited," as an act of will. And while God appears in that reconstruction, He does so only as a logical postulate following from the idea of the infinite.

From there, it is a short step to Kant's transcendental ego, for whom the world is the representation of its own irreducible "I think," and which (inasmuch as it is its own infinity) requires God as a postulate only in the realm of ethics, and merely as a regulative idea in the realm of epistemology. And the passage from transcendental idealism to absolute idealism, however much it involved an attempt to escape egoistic subjectivity, had no world to which to return. Even Hegel's system, for all that it sought to have done with petty subjectivism, could do so only by way of a massive metaphysical myth of the self-positing of the Concept, and of a more terrible economy of necessity than any pagan antiquity had imagined. This project was, in every sense, incredible, and its collapse inevitably brought philosophy, by way of Nietzsche and Heidegger, to its "postmodern condition"—a "heap of broken images." If Heidegger was right—and he was—in saying that there was always a nihilistic core to the Western philosophical tradition, the withdrawal of Christianity leaves nothing but that core behind, for the gospel long ago stripped away both the deceits and the glories that had concealed it; and so philosophy becomes, almost by force of habit, explicit nihilism.

Modern philosophy, however, merely reflects the state of modern culture and modern cult; and it is to this sphere that I should turn now, as it is here that spiritual warfare is principally to be waged.

I should admit that I, for one, feel considerable sympathy for Nietzsche's plaint, "Nearly two-thousand years and no new god"—and for Heidegger intoning his mournful oracle: "Only a god can save us." But of course none will come. The Christian God has taken up everything into Himself; all the treasures of ancient wisdom, all the splendor of creation, every good thing has been assumed into the story of the incarnate God, and every stirring towards transcendence is soon recognized by the modern mind—wearied of God—as leading back towards faith. Antique pieties cannot be restored, for we moderns know that the hungers they excite can be sated only by the gospel of Christ and him crucified. To be a Stoic today, for instance, is simply to be a soul *in via* to the Church; a Platonist, most of us understand, is only a Christian manqué; and a polytheist is merely a truant from the one God he hates and loves.

The only cult that can truly thrive in the aftermath of Christianity is a sordid service of the self, of the impulses of the will, of the nothingness that is all that the withdrawal of Christianity leaves behind. The only futures open to post-Christian culture are conscious nihilism, with its inevitable devotion to death, or the narcotic banality of the Last Men, which may be little better than death. Surveying the desert of modernity, we would be, I think, morally derelict not to acknowledge that Nietzsche was right in holding Christianity responsible for the catastrophe around us (even if he misunderstood why); we should confess that the failure of Christian culture to live up to its victory over the old gods has allowed the dark power that once hid behind them to step forward *in propria persona*. And we should certainly dread whatever rough beast it is that is being bred in our ever coarser, crueler, more inarticulate, more vacuous popular culture; because, cloaked in its anodyne insipience, lies a world increasingly devoid of merit, wit, kindness, imagination, or charity.

These are, I admit, extreme formulations. But, while I may delight in provocation, I do not wish on this point to be misunderstood. When recently I made these very remarks from a speaker's podium, two theologians (neither of whom I would consider a champion of modernity) raised objections. From one quarter, I was chided for forgetting the selflessness of which modern persons are capable. September 11, 2001, I was reminded, demonstrated the truth of this, surely; and those of us who teach undergraduates must be aware that, for all the cultural privations they suffer, they are often decent and admirable. From the other quarter I was cautioned that so starkly stated an alternative as "Christianity or nihilism" amounted to a denial of the goodness of natural wisdom and virtue, and seemed to suggest that *gratia non perficit, sed destruit naturam*. As fair as such remarks may be, however, they are not apposite to my argument.

In regard to the first objection, I would wish to reply by making clear that I do not intend to suggest that, because modernity has lost the organic integrity of Christianity's moral grammar, every person living in modern society must therefore become heartless, violent, or unprincipled. My observations are directed at the dominant language and ethos of a culture, not at the souls of individuals. Many among us retain some loyalty to ancient principles, most of us are in some degree premodern, and there are always and everywhere to be found examples of natural virtue, innate nobility, congenital charity, and so on, for the light of God is ubiquitous and the image of God is impressed upon our nature. The issue for me is whether, within the moral

grammar of modernity, any of these good souls could give an account of his or her virtue.

I wish, that is, to make a point not conspicuously different from Alasdair MacIntyre's in the first chapter of his *After Virtue*: in the wake of a morality of the Good, ethics has become a kind of incoherent bricolage. As far as I can tell, *homo nihilisticus* may often be in several notable respects a far more amiable rogue than *homo religiosus*, exhibiting a far smaller propensity for breaking the crockery, destroying sacred statuary, or slaying the nearest available infidel. But, love, let us be true to one another: even when all of this is granted, it would be a willful and culpable blindness for us to refuse to recognize how aesthetically arid, culturally worthless, and spiritually depraved our society has become. That this is not hyperbole a dispassionate appraisal of the artifacts of popular culture—of the imaginative coarseness and cruelty informing them—will quickly confirm. For me, it is enough to consider that, in America alone, more than forty million babies have been aborted since the Supreme Court invented the "right" that allows for this, and that there are many for whom this is viewed not even as a tragic "necessity," but as a triumph of moral truth. When the Carthaginians were prevailed upon to cease sacrificing their babies, at least the place vacated by Baal reminded them that they should seek the divine above themselves; we offer up our babies to "my" freedom of choice, to "me." No society's moral vision has ever, surely, been more degenerate than that.

And to the second objection, I would begin by noting that my remarks here do not concern the entirety of human experience, nature, or culture; they concern one particular location in time and space: late Western modernity. Nor have I anything to say about cultures or peoples who have not suffered the history of faith and disenchantment we have, or who do not share our particular relation to European antiquity or the heritage of ancient Christendom. "Nihilism" is simply a name for post-Christian sensibility and conviction (and not even an especially opprobrious one). Moreover, the alternative between Christianity and nihilism is never, in actual practice, a kind of Kierkegaardian either/or posed between two absolute antinomies, incapable of alloy or medium; it is an antagonism that occurs along a continuum, whose extremes are rarely perfectly expressed in any single life (else the world were all saints and satanists).

Most importantly, though, my observations do not concern nature at all, which is inextinguishable and which, at some level, always longs for God; they concern culture, which has the power to purge itself of the natural in some considerable degree. Indeed, much of the discourse of late modernity—speculative, critical,

moral, and political—consists precisely in an attempt to deny the authority, or even the reality, of any general order of nature or natures. Nature is good, I readily affirm, and is itself the first gift of grace. But that is rather the point at issue: for modernity is unnatural, is indeed anti-nature, or even anti-Christ (and so goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom it may devour).

Which is why I repeat that our age is not one in danger of reverting to paganism (would that we were so fortunate). If we turn from Christ today, we turn only towards the god of absolute will, and embrace him under either his most monstrous or his most vapid aspect. A somewhat more ennobling retreat to the old gods is not possible for us; we can find no shelter there, nor can we sink away gently into those old illusions and tragic consolations that Christ has exposed as falsehoods. To love or be nourished by the gods, we would have to fear them; but the ruin of their glory is so complete that they have been reduced—like everything else—to commodities.

Nor will the ululations and lugubrious platitudes and pious fatalism of the tragic chorus ever again have the power to recall us to sobriety. The gospel of a God found in broken flesh, humility, and measureless charity has defeated all the old lies, rendered the ancient order visibly insufficient and even slightly absurd, and instilled in us a longing for transcendent love so deep that—if once yielded to—it will never grant us rest anywhere but in Christ. And there is a real sadness in this, because the consequences of so great a joy rejected are a sorrow, bewilderment, and anxiety for which there is no precedent. If the nonsensical religious fascinations of today are not, in any classical or Christian sense, genuine pieties, they are nevertheless genuine—if deluded—expressions of grief, encomia for a forsaken and half-forgotten home, the prisoner's lament over a lost freedom. For Christians, then, to recover and understand the meaning of the command to have "no other god," it is necessary first to recognize that the victory of the Church in history was not only incomplete, but indeed set free a force that the old sacral order had at least been able to contain; and it is against this more formless and invincible enemy that we take up the standard of the commandment today.

Moreover, we need to recognize, in the light of this history, that this commandment is a hard discipline: it destroys, it breaks in order to bind; like a cautery, it wounds in order to heal; and now, in order to heal the damage it has in part inflicted, it must be applied again. In practical terms, I suspect that this means that Christians must make an ever more concerted effort to recall and recover the wisdom and centrality of the ascetic tradition. It takes formidable faith and devotion to resist the evils of one's age, and it is to the history of

Christian asceticism—especially, perhaps, the apophthegms of the Desert Fathers—that all Christians, whether married or not, should turn for guidance. To have no god but the God of Christ, after all, means today that we must endure the lenten privations of what is most certainly a dark age, and strive to resist the bland solace, inane charms, brute viciousness, and dazed passivity of post-Christian culture—all of which are so tempting precisely because they enjoin us to believe in and adore ourselves.

It means also to remain aloof from many of the moral languages of our time, which are—even at their most sentimental, tender, and tolerant—usually as decadent and egoistic as the currently most fashionable vices. It means, in short, self-abnegation, contrarianism, a willingness not only to welcome but to condemn, and a refusal of secularization as fierce as the refusal of our Christian ancestors to burn incense to the genius of the emperor. This is not an especially grim prescription, I should add: Christian asceticism is not, after all, a cruel disfigurement of the will, contaminated by the world-weariness or malice towards creation that one can justly ascribe to many other varieties of religious detachment. It is, rather, the cultivation of the pure heart and pure eye, which allows one to receive the world, and rejoice in it, not as a possession of the will or an occasion for the exercise of power, but as the good gift of God. It is, so to speak, a kind of "Marian" waiting upon the Word of God and its fruitfulness. This is why it has the power to heal us of our modern derangements: because, paradoxical as it may seem to modern temperaments, Christian asceticism is the practice of love, what Maximus the Confessor calls learning to see the logos of each thing within the Logos of God, and it eventuates most properly in the grateful reverence of a Bonaventure or the lyrical ecstasy of a Thomas Traherne.

Still, it is a discipline for all that; and for us today it must involve the painful acknowledgement that neither we nor our distant progeny will live to see a new Christian culture rise in the Western world, and to accept this with both charity and faith. We must, after all, grant that, in the mystery of God's providence, all of this has followed from the work of the Holy Spirit in time. Modern persons will never find rest for their restless hearts without Christ, for modern culture is nothing but the wasteland from which the gods have departed, and so this restlessness has become its own deity; and, deprived of the shelter of the sacred and the consoling myths of sacrifice, the modern person must wander or drift, vainly attempting one or another accommodation with death, never escaping anxiety or ennui, and driven as a result to a ceaseless labor of dis-

traction, or acquisition, or willful idiocy. And, where it works its sublimest magic, our culture of empty spectacle can so stupefy the intellect as to blind it to its own disquiet, and induce a spiritual torpor more deplorable than mere despair.

But we Christians—while not ignoring how appalling such a condition is—should yet rejoice that modernity offers no religious comforts to those who would seek them. In this time of waiting, in this age marked only by the absence of faith in Christ, it is well that the modern soul should lack repose, piety, peace, or nobility, and should find the world outside the Church barren of spiritual rapture or mystery, and should discover no beautiful or terrible or merci-

ful gods upon which to cast itself. With Christ came judgment into the world, a light of discrimination from which there is neither retreat nor sanctuary. And this means that, as a quite concrete historical condition, the only choice that remains for the children of post-Christian culture is not whom to serve, but whether to serve Him whom Christ has revealed or to serve nothing—the nothing. No third way lies open for us now, because—as all of us now know, whether we acknowledge it consciously or not—all things have been made subject to Him, all the thrones and dominions of the high places have been put beneath His feet, until the very end of the world, and—simply said—there is no other god. PT

Verses of the Soul That Pines to See God

Not in myself do I live
but in such great hope, that I
die of longing to die.

I no longer live in me;
lacking God, from life I'm driven;
lacking God or self to live in,
what, then, can this living be?
True life must come, by and by.
A thousand deaths is the fee,
since life must come, by and by,
and I die, longing to die.

This life that I now endure
is not life but its denial;
a continuous death, my trial
till I dwell with you secure.
Gather, my Lord, with what sure
contempt from this life I fly
and I die, longing to die.

Absent, as I am, from you,
what life can I have but death
who suffer, in drawing breath,
what the greatest death can do?
I regard my fate with rue;
my misfortunes multiply;
I die with longing to die.

The fish that's pulled from the wave
finds balm of a certain sort:
the death he suffers is short
and brings the rest he may crave.
But what death could be as grave
as mine, who in life must sigh,
and live more, the more to die?

What comfort I taste is brief
finding you in bread and wine:
to know you cannot be mine
recalls me to greater grief.
I sorrow without relief
for the sight that you deny,
and die, for I long to die.

My joy, Lord, is to believe
that I shall behold you clear;
but doubting you will appear
causes me doubly to grieve
when such terror I conceive,
and harbor a hope so high,
that I die, longing to die.

*St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)
translated from the Spanish by
Rhina P. Espaillat*

